

Mauritius By Bike!

“Let’s go on a cycling holiday,” said my teenage sons Remy and Raffy one day.

Great news! I love sport and always try to arrange active trips for them. Sometimes it works, sometimes they get side-tracked by girls and bars.

This time, sport would be number one. So I looked for an island we could ride around in a week: not too big or hilly, but not too small either. Preferably warm and beautiful.

Mauritius was the perfect option. Just 65km long and 45km wide, the whole coastline totals 250km. We decided to break it into four sections, sending our bags ahead by taxi.

We hired bikes, booked hotels and took the 12-hour Air Mauritius flight from Heathrow.



Ready to ride!

Starting from Blue Bay, close to the airport in the island’s southeast corner, we rode through the town of Mahebourg and up the east coast, passing through fields of sugar cane – the island’s main crop – and past a series of lovely beaches.

There were reminders of Mauritius’s history under different colonial powers: a Dutch fortress, French place names, British rules (they drive on the left).

These days, the biggest influence comes from India. Many people are Hindu and there are spectacular temples all over the island.



Siva Soopramaniam Kovil temple, Goodlands



Sagar Shiv Mandir temple, Poste de Flacq

The roads were blissfully free of traffic. Locals smiled and waved at us and we stopped for lunch at a roadside café. A delicious chicken noodle dish cost £1 and the owner chatted happily about English Premier League soccer. He was a Liverpool fan.

After about three hours of cycling we came to Solana Beach Resort in Belle Mare, one of the finest stretches of coastline on the island, with a calm lagoon. Surf breaks on the reef about 300m out to sea and palm trees shade the quiet lanes decked with flowers.

Day two was a 'rest' day, which meant a 10km run along the beach for me, tennis for the boys, then boules in the hotel gardens, a swim in the lagoon to see some tropical fish and a few games of pool after a buffet dinner.



Belle Mare beach at dawn



Boules in the gardens

Next day we headed north and right up to the top of the island, where we came to Cap Malheureux (meaning 'Cape of Bad Luck', due to the many shipwrecks).

It is the most stunning sight: the seas are bright turquoise, there's a magnificent island out to sea, a tranquil beach and an ancient red-painted church.

Families come to picnic while fishermen prepare their catches. We ate at a local café called the 'Chill Out' with views over the bay and the freshest fish you could wish for. Remy had filet of *dorade* – bream in English.



View from Cap Malheureux



Fishermen preparing their catch

After lunch we cycled on through more small towns and into Grand Baie, the nightlife hotspot of Mauritius. I'd proposed staying here, so the boys could let rip for a night, but they turned me down.

What's happening with the world, when your teenage sons are more interested in cycling than partying?

Instead, we headed down the west coast to Turtle Bay and the Oberoi Beach Resort. This Indian-owned hotel is among the best in the world, never mind Mauritius. It has just 71 villas, each with its own pool, set in fabulous gardens next to pristine white beaches.

General manager Aditya Pandey comes out to greet each new guest – although he was a bit surprised to find us arriving by bike. "It's never happened before!" he said.

Aditya invited us to have a cocktail at a beachfront bar and told us the story of the 23-year-old resort, how it's a favourite of Bollywood stars and politicians.



Chatting with Aditya as the sun set



Chilling in the private pool

We were soon in heaven, especially once our lobster dishes arrived for dinner at the beachside restaurant. The food here was world class – literally. The lobster came from Madagascar, the lamb from Ireland and the steak from Australia.



Remy astonished by his lobster



The Oberoi's pristine beaches

While most guests at the Oberoi tend to take it easy, our next non-cycling day was devoted to water-sports.

We swam, water-skied, snorkelled and sailed from dawn to dusk, cheerfully assisted by the Oberoi's ever-helpful staff. Out in the lagoon, a pod of dolphins leapt from the water.

And as evening fell, the giant banyan tree next to our villas began to vibrate with the sound of a thousand tweeting birds. The sun set over the perfect gardens and we ate another magnificent meal, this time gourmet Indian dishes - seven of them!



Waterskiing at the Oberoi

Dragging ourselves away from the Oberoi, we cycled off to the Botanical Gardens, one of the jewels of Mauritius. It's in a small town called Pamplemousses ('Grapefruits') and was started by the French governor of the island in the early 18th century.

There are spreading lily ponds, wild-shaped palms, forests of giant ferns and an old colonial mansion. We found it all very relaxing and beautiful.



Botanical Gardens in Pampelmousses

Less relaxing was cycling through the capital Port Louis. We had to contend with massive trucks, chaotic motorcycles zigzagging through the traffic, clouds of diesel fumes and three-lane highways.

This was the only part of the trip that was a real challenge, cycling-wise. I was glad that Remy and Raffy are strong, competent cyclists who are confident in heavy traffic. Anyone younger than, say, 16 years old, or who is nervous around trucks, might struggle.

You can avoid Port Louis by going inland. It would take longer, but would be less stressful.

Once we left the main A1 road and headed southwest towards Bambous, things were much calmer and we could see the dramatic peaks of the Black River Gorges national park rising up to our left.

It was a boiling hot day but Raffy wanted to race all the way to the next hotel, so Remy and I had to force him to take a break. He's nuts that boy!



Raffy racing down the west coast



Taking a break on a boiling hot day

At last we reached Le Morne, the horsehead-shaped peninsula that juts out of the southwest corner of Mauritius, complete with the stupendous Le Morne Brabant rock, rising 556m into the sky.

This was where hundreds of escaped slaves threw themselves to their deaths in 1835 because they feared being recaptured by the police, sent to tell them they were now free. Since 2008 it has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

For us, the JW Marriott resort was a welcome respite from our tough day in the saddle. We were greeted by friendly managers who invited us for a sunset drink on the beach. Remy and Raffy learned how to do champagne sabring – where you cut the top off a bottle with a sword.

After a sumptuous dinner we wandered past the enormous swimming pool, one of the largest on the island, and checked out the games room, with its fancy pool table and giant TV screen showing EPL football matches.

One of the quirks of the Marriott is its butler service. A quick phone call and he or she will pop along to unpack or pack your luggage, bring you food and drinks or wake you up in the morning. We didn't trouble our butler during our stay, but it's nice to know you have one.



At the Marriott pool

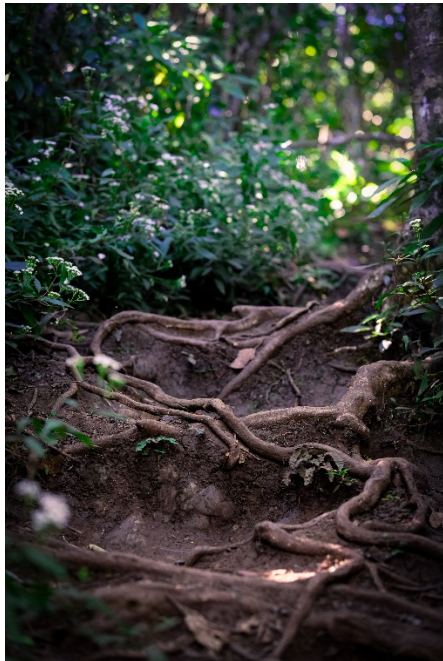


Raffy on the beach

Rest day at the Marriott meant just that for Remy. He sat by the pool and ordered pizza for lunch.

Raffy and I, meanwhile, took a cab into the national park and hiked for two hours through dense jungle up to the highest point on the island – Piton de la Petite Rivière Noire.

We had to clamber over tree trunks and tangled roots, then pull ourselves up an almost vertical cliff on a rope for 200m before summiting at 828m (2,716 feet). It was a full-on experience and a lot of people turn back when they reach the rope section, but the views from the top are truly wonderful. You can see right across the island.



Hiking through the jungle



Rope climb to the summit



Raffy and me at the summit



View of Le Morne from the peak

Our fourth and final day of cycling was also our longest. We traversed the entire south coast back to Mahebourg then headed north to Beau Champ.

Along the way were many more glorious beaches – Bel Ombre and St Felix were both outrageously beautiful – and we stopped for another roadside treat. This time we had huge plates of chicken biryani in Plaine Magnien.

After a week of exercise, we were all pretty strong now. Doing 50km before lunch didn't seem that hard.



Spectacular beach at Bel Ombre



Chicken biryani at a roadside café

As we neared our final resort, The Four Seasons Anahita in Beau Champs, Raffy once more broke into a sprint and zoomed ahead. Then he thoughtfully took pictures of Remy and me arriving at the end of our journey, having completed 90km that day and 276km altogether.

The Four Seasons is another super-plush hotel, set amid a splendid golf course designed by the South African legend Ernie Els. We had a chic villa with plunge pool and outdoor shower, surrounded by lush gardens.



Three in a row



The finish line

After sushi at the Umi.Zaka restaurant, we pitched up at the Four Seasons' games room to find Jonathan, the resident kids' entertainer and activities chief. Besides pool, table tennis and soccer on TV, Jonathan showed the boys how to use a DJ mixing deck. This was a stand-out feature from their point of view. Rem 'n' Raff in da house!

We spent our final day in Mauritius having lunch on Ile des Cerfs, a short motorboat ride from the Four Seasons, where the hotel has its own private beach and restaurant. We ate tuna burgers by the sea and reflected on a magnificent week in Mauritius.

Great idea, boys. We adored the island from top to toe.

And thanks to its amazingly hospitable people for making it one of the best and most magical holidays ever.



On the boat to Ile des Cerfs

How to plan a trip to Mauritius

London to Mauritius on www.airmauritius.com – 12 hours from Heathrow.

www.britishairways.com also has direct flights from Heathrow.

Where to stay:

Solana Beach Resort (over-18s) - <https://www.booking.com/hotel/mu/solana-beach.en-gb.html>

Oberoi Beach Resort, Turtle Bay - <https://www.oberoihotels.com/hotels-in-mauritius/>

JW Marriott Mauritius Le Morne - <https://www.marriott.com/en-us/hotels/mrujw-jw-marriott-mauritius-resort/overview/>

Four Seasons at Anahita - <https://www.fourseasons.com/mauritius/>

Good to know:

Cycle hire from Real Mauritius - <https://www.realmauritius.mu/>

Mauritius Tourism Authority - <https://www.mauritius.net/>